# Potential and the Nature of the Mind (2001)

One of the oldest and most pithy collections of Buddhist scriptures is the Pali *Dhammapada*. It contains no stories, but is filled with hundreds of very direct teachings delivered by the Buddha himself. Its very first verse goes like this:

Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is their chief; mind-made are they[1] …

Which, in Pali, goes: *Manopubban.gamaa dhammaa | Manoset.t.aa | Manomayaa*. So the very first word we encounter is *mano:* mind. But in what sense is mind is the 'first thing'? It is rather an interesting idea. Even more so is the Buddha's second statement that all *dhammas* or phenomena are mind-made, are *manomayaa* – that they are actually made up of mind.

So right from the very beginning of these verses we find ourselves introduced to a profound reality. What is mind? It is a challenging question to try to answer. Each of us experiences mind, but what can we really say about its real nature?

A famous example of meditation on this classic question can be found in the life of Milarepa, the great Tibetan yogin. A young shepherd boy came and asked him for instruction. "In the house of the body is there just one mind, or are there several?" It's a good question; after all, we experience many different sides to our character. Why shouldn't these be different minds? What is a mind, after all? Milarepa told the boy to find out for himself: "Just have a look at your actual experience."

After work that night the boy thought deeply. Next morning, he came back to Milarepa's cave. "Dear Lama, last night I tried to find out what my mind is and how it works. I observed it carefully and found that I have only one mind. Even though one wants to, one cannot kill this mind. However much one wishes to dismiss it, it will not go away. If one tries to catch it, it cannot be grasped… If you want it to remain, it will not stay; if you release it, it will not go. …You try to see it; it cannot be seen. You try to understand it; it cannot be known. …It is something illuminating, aware, wide-awake, yet incomprehensible." One might expect a lad who looks after sheep all the time to be unimaginative or dull; but not this one!

Milarepa gets interested. "Now, when you get home, try to find out the shape and colour of your mind. Is it white, red, or what? Is it oblong, round, or what? And also, while you're about it, see if you can locate where your mind is in your body". Again, this lad really applies himself. When Milarepa asks the next morning what the mind looks like, and where it is in the body, he replies: "Well, it has no colour or shape. When it associates with the eyes, it sees; when with the ear, it hears; when with the nose, it smells; when with the tongue, it tastes and talks; and when it associates with the feet, it walks. If the body is agitated, the mind, too, is stirred".

It is obvious to Milarepa that the boy is very committed to the Dharma. So he introduces him to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and says that he should recite the Going for Refuge verses continually, all the time. Presumably this is to encourage him to reflect on them, so that he really gets to understand the meaning of Going for Refuge. But at the same time, Milarepa says, he should enquire as to *who* goes for refuge. Does the mind go for refuge? Does the body go for refuge? Again, it is a very good question. What is it, actually, that goes for refuge?

When the boy comes along next morning he hasn't had much success. "Dear Lama, last night I tried to find which of these two takes refuge, the body or the mind. I found that it is neither … I asked myself, 'is it the body as a whole which takes refuge?' [Well], it cannot be so, for when the mind leaves the body, the [body] no longer exists. People then call it a 'corpse' – certainly [that] cannot be called a 'refuge seeker'… I then asked myself, 'Is it the mind which takes refuge?' But the refuge-seeker cannot be the mind." The more the shepherd boy looks into his experience, the less easy it becomes to understand how the mind can be said to go for refuge. "You can't say it's the mind I experience in the present that goes for refuge, because that's gone in a split second. And obviously it's not the past mind that does it either, because that went some time ago. And you can't say it's the future mind, because that doesn't exist yet. Yet you can't say it's all of these either, because it's not as though they fit together in a seamless continuity. That isn't my experience at all. So, dear Milarepa, what actually goes on? Please teach me how to realise the nature of my mind – I'm amazed and baffled at what I have discovered!"

In response, Milarepa starts singing one of his famous songs.

"Listen carefully, dear shepherd.
What characterises the mind is clinging to the notion of a self.
But if one looks carefully into this mind, one actually sees no self at all.
If you can learn how really to observe this [apparent] 'nothing',
Then you'll find that 'something' will be seen".

Continuing his song, Milarepa makes clear just how much faith and energy the shepherd boy will need, if he is to realise the mind's nature. He will need to develop merit, he will need to become courageous, and he will need to learn how to disregard discomfort and difficulties. In other words Milarepa spells out much more explicitly what it will mean for this shepherd boy actually to go for refuge to him as a teacher of the Buddhadharma. He's asking, 'is this what you *really* want?' And he concludes: "When you sought the 'I' last night you could not find it. Your meditation on the self revealed to you just a little a taste of the essential selflessness of your personality (*pudgala*). But there is a larger dimension of

non-self, and that is the selflessness (*nairatmya*) of all *dharmas*, the emptiness of all existence whatsoever. If you follow my example and meditate for twelve years, then you will also realise this – you will then understand for yourself the nature of the mind. So think well on this, dear boy!" The shepherd, as you might imagine, is deeply affected. He says, "I offer you my whole life. Please make me understand my own mind definitely and clearly." Milarepa is encouraged and thinks, "Well, let's see whether this child can really practice". And he gives him some instruction in concentration, and sends him away.

Nothing is heard of the boy for a whole week. In fact he goes into a state of *samadhi* for that whole time. His family eventually send out a search party, and find him meditating. At first he's a little irritated and doesn't understand what all the fuss is about. But when he sees the sun showing an earlier time than when he sat down, he really gets confused! Time can pass quickly when you transcend the ordinary mind. This incident convinces Milarepa that the shepherd boy can practice, so he gives him the full Going for Refuge with the precepts – and also teaches him the Dharma. The text[1] says that Milarepa then 'granted him the teaching of the Innate-born Wisdom', and after some years of practice the shepherd boy became a realised yogin like Milarepa himself.

We don't know exactly what this teaching of the innate-born wisdom was, at least the text doesn't tell us – but it clearly has to do with the idea that wisdom, or Enlightenment, is innate; in other words, Enlightenment is already within us in some way, so that what we have to do is to uncover it. This is the doctrine of the Buddha-nature, which is also known as *Tathagatagarbha*, the seed or the womb of Buddhahood. The idea is difficult to grasp correctly – because it's easy to grasp it, incorrectly, as meaning that we are literally already enlightened. People often like the idea that there's something already there in us, just waiting to be woken up. It rings true in a certain kind of way. It also makes the spiritual path appear an easy, simple matter: relax, let go the hindrances, and just let the Buddha nature shine forth!

Indeed, the idea does have a certain ring of truth. When we actually do manage to relinquish some obstacle, something certainly happens. But was that 'something' there *already*? If it was indeed already there, what need could there have been to let anything go? Why did we need to make that effort in the first place? At this point we can get rather knotted up in logical problems, which arise because we are trying to describe something that cannot adequately be described. Of course the Buddha nature wasn't there already in a literal sense. Yet nonetheless, the Buddha nature is there in all beings, all the time. It's one of those paradoxes that are unavoidable when you are talking about something that transcends ordinary logic and experience. To understand what the Buddha nature really is, we have to enquire within ourselves what it means, in actual practice, to 'relax', 'let go', and 'uncover' it.

The spiritual path does indeed require us to relinquish and relax certain traits and activities. On a basic level, we surely need to do lots of this. Many of us feel as though we holding in masses of anxiety and uptightness – we're a minefield of tension, it seems, with danger spots everywhere just waiting to be triggered into something destructive. It's only when we come across the Dharma, and start to meet our experience with mindfulness, that we can truly discover how to relax. We can begin seeing things less subjectively, and to consider, for the first time, that our endless anxiety and tension is part of a moral issue. It derives from our endless cravings, hatreds and delusions: that is, with our attitude and with our behaviour. And it becomes clear from our Buddhist practice that we can actually change it, that we can deliberately let go some of those habits and unskilful attitudes. It will take some time, but when we have completely let go our craving, hatred and delusion, we'll be Enlightened.

So it is in this sense that Buddhahood is within us all. All beings have the potential to relinquish their attachment to craving, hatred, and delusion. This is basic Buddhism; if it were not the case that all beings could gain Enlightenment, then there would be no Buddhism, because the Buddha would not have taken the trouble to teach us. So I have Buddha nature, and so do you. Even a dog has the Buddha nature, according to a famous *koan* – *because* if even a moment of the most rudimentary moral consciousness can arise, then that tiny spark of vision could possibly spark off the very beginnings of the growth of that potential for Enlightenment. I wouldn't like to go much further than dogs and cats, because I suppose that the process is most likely to develop in a human existence, but in principle, it can start in anyone. Anyone can actualise their potential – if they want to.

And there's the rub. To grasp correctly the idea of the Buddha nature, we need to understand what *actualising* potential really involves. You and I both have some potential to become a Buddha. You and I also have some potential to become an air traffic controller, a stand-up comedian, or an expert on mediaeval history. Does it sound easier to gain Enlightenment?

In my time I have travelled to see any number of ruinous structures alleged to have the potential to become FWBO centres. For example there was the Old Fire Station in Bethnal Green. There was that big old warehouse in Manchester. There was Vajraloka. I've seen all these transformed into FWBO centres, but invariably that transformation has taken place through years of extremely hard work. My friends and I would appreciate the potential. Gaping at these dingy semi derelict hulks the comment, sure enough, would be: "Oh yes, terrific potential". The word almost becomes a joke, when you know very well the oceans of blood, sweat, and tears that will be shed should you be mad enough to go ahead and actualise such prodigious potential.

Actualising potential is hard work: blood, sweat, tears, toil, and struggle. Yet struggle is how we build our character. Struggle is important for our becoming strong in the Dharma; it's an important part of our development. And strange though it may seem, the struggles we face in our spiritual lives relate directly to the issue of relaxation: usually, they are about our inability to relinquish habitual patterns of behaviour. Letting go sounds so easy, but the reality is quite different when we don't *want* to let go of whatever it is. And at the same time, making an effort *sounds* difficult, but the reality is quite different. Making an effort isn't difficult at all when it's something we really want to do! So effort is

not necessarily difficult; relaxation is not necessarily easy. We have to look at our actual experience.

We can see relaxation and effort – struggle and relaxation – in terms of the Bodhisattva Paramitas of *kshanti* and *virya*. 'Relaxation' corresponds to *kshanti*, or 'patience': being relaxed, we are non-reactive, not impatient. We can allow space to experience things properly, to wait and see what the best thing is to do. Yet in our world, 'patience' is seen as a passive holding back, a possibly resentful gritting of the teeth, whereas for Buddhism, kshanti is that spaciousness of mind that allows us to make productive choices. It is in fact the basis of spiritual life, the essential spirit of mindfulness. It is kshanti that allows us fully to make an effort, and get behind our actions with 100% of ourselves. Without *kshanti*, our efforts are wilful; they are lacking in awareness.

So the Buddha-nature is a useful idea – rightly grasped. If we misunderstand it to mean that we are literally enlightened already, then we are likely to become spectacularly confused – because on the whole we don't appear to be at all enlightened. Yet we do have the Buddha *nature*. We are a potential Buddha. If we could remember that more of the time, and appreciate its meaning, perhaps we would practice more like one.

If we can remember to stay awake and aware of our knee-jerk reactions to our experiences, we'll know each experience more as it actually is. And this is the very place in which the potential for Buddhahood will unfold in us. This is indeed the Tathagatagarbha, the 'womb of the Buddha' – the place where Buddhas come from. When we feel our anger rising, but notice it and don't lash out, *there's* the Buddha-nature. When we relax into a spacious and intelligent responsiveness, instead of gripping our world tightly in a panic, right *there* the Buddha-nature is starting to unfold. The Buddha nature is the potential for that process to unfold naturally. It is an aspect of ordinary nature – not of the reactive power-based Mother Nature, 'red in tooth and claw', but of the enlightening, human, flowering-into-loving kindness-and-wisdom nature.

The Buddha nature can also be seen as positive *pratityasamutpada,* the alternate process to what is known as the endless Wheel of Becoming. Instead of becoming more and more depressed and needy in response to our various sufferings, as people often do, we are instead inspired by the Dharma so that we are able to meet our situation and see it with insight – insight that liberates us from the cyclic processes of addiction, neediness, depression, and frustration. Again, that process of insight is potential within us all; what we need to do is to activate it.

So perhaps this is why the shepherd boy is given the practice of 'the innate wisdom', as a way to untie the knots that prevent him from moving out of the cyclic process on to the spiral process. Quite possibly he meditated on Vajrasattva, the Buddha in Bodhisattva form who is white like snow, and who holds the thunderbolt of wisdom and the bell of skilful means. Vajrasattva represents primordial purity; the fact that outside time we have never become impure, that we are eternally enlightened, and have never been other than fully enlightened.

Hang on a minute. That sounds as though Buddhism does say, after all, literally, that we are enlightened already. But the idea of one's innate Vajrasattva nature existing outside time cannot be taken literally. Here we are looking at the notion of Buddha Nature in terms of time and transcendence of time. We are addressing the amazing mystery of our *experience* of time. Certainly, it is strange how the time we actually experience, and the 'clock time' that works globally across time zones, are such very different things. Depending on how old we are, how happy we are, and how absorbed we are in what we're doing, our personal experience of time varies enormously. So in what manner does time really exist, and therefore what might it mean to be enlightened 'outside time' as suggested by the spirit of Vajrasattva? Well, we might just as well ask what it means to be enlightened within time; it's no less mysterious. Time is as inexplicable an experience as the mind; and the two go together in the unenlightened mind.

We saw how the shepherd boy found the notion of time problematic when he started looking at the actual nature of his experience. He was forced to start wondering if there really is a present moment, or whether that is just another construct, just another idea that has no basis in actual experience. And at one point he went completely 'out of time' for seven days. Well, no doubt the practice of the innate wisdom that Milarepa gave him helped him to get to grips with this issue. Because the thing about our innate potential is that it is inseparable from the idea of time. Potential takes *time* to unfold. From an Enlightened perspective, time is an illusion; it's a human construct, our attempt to explain the inexplicable. The notion of time helps us make a neater package of our fleeting hold on existence.

What is shown by these meditations on time or timelessness, and the nature of the mind, is that we cannot know these most essential things with our ordinary intelligence. We come to the point of view of Socrates who alone of all people truly knew that he did not know. We see that to go further we need to practice meditation, reflection, and a way of life that will support meditation and reflection. We get to the point when we actually want to meditate and to reflect on the Dharma. We get to the point where we actually want to practice ethically, so that our state of mind will at all times be attuned to such meditation and reflection, be more in accordance with what is truly natural – more in accordance with our potential for Buddhahood.

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aterial is all taken, and where clarification is needed freely adapted, from 'The Shepherd's Search for Mind' in *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* translated by Garma C.C. Chang and published by Shambhala, 1989